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DEPT FOR EUR/AGS, INR/EU, AND EUR/PPD FOR YVETTE SAINT-ANDRE

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WHITEHOUSE FOR NSC/WEUROPE

E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: May 23, 2007

Lengthy Eurofighter Tests

11. The quality control test for the first Eurofighter jets for the Austrian armed forces will take longer than the usual testing period of two days, a spokesperson for Eurofighter told the Austrian Press Agency yesterday. This is "not unusual," however, given that it is the first interceptor earmarked for Austria to be tested, Wolfdietrich Hoeveler added, according to Austrian Press Agency APA.

Town Signs Back on the Agenda

12. Austrian Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer and Carinthian Governor Joerg Haider are meeting today to discuss ways to resolve the controversy over bi-lingual town signs in Austria's southernmost province. The Chancellor is optimistic his "specific proposal" will make it possible to solve the issue before summer, Austrian media report, ORF online news wrote.

Ambassador Gives Interview in Tyrol

13. In an interview with an Austrian regional daily, US Ambassador Susan McCaw increased pressure on Austrian energy provider OMV, criticizing the company for its planned natural gas deal with Iran.

In an interview with regional Austrian daily Tiroler Tageszeitung, US Ambassador to Austria Susan McCaw explained the US government's misgivings over energy provider OMV's planned business deal with Iran. Ambassador McCaw said that "currently, the US is looking into whether sanctions can be imposed [against OMV under the Iran Sanctions Act]. In Congress there has been a lot of criticism of OMV's Iran deal." The matter has "definitely" caused a stir, not only in Austria, but also in Washington, the Ambassador confirmed. Ambassador McCaw also said that "under normal circumstances the issue would be addressed via our discussion channels with OMV and the Austrian government. But since the issue has been generating a lot of attention in the media, I decided to publicly explain our position. It is currently an important topic in our relations with Austria." Despite the tensions over the OMV's Iran deal, the Ambassador describes US-Austrian relations as "quite positive. There are difficult situations or aspects in every relationship. 99 percent of the time you agree, but then something comes up that one of you considers questionable or important." Regarding the possible outcome of the OMV tensions, the Ambassador said that OMV "is a private company; it does what it does. They know that legally we cannot stop them. But we can emphasize the political fallout of such

(business) arrangements. They undermine the sanctions against Iran, but more importantly, they are taking away the economic incentives we have offered Iran. We've told Iran: If you genuinely stop uranium enrichment and return to the negotiating table, we'll offer you economic commitment. But if OMV simply ignores that and goes ahead and does business with Iran - of course, something like that undermines our incentives."

American Corner for Innsbruck

¶4. Austrian mass-circulation daily Kurier for Tyrol reported that US Ambassador to Austria Susan McCaw opened the first American Corner (ACI) in Austria at the University of Innsbruck on Monday. The ACI is to be a hub for all issues concerning the United States, the head of the American Corner, Professor Gudrun Grabher explained.

Delta's Austrian Destination

¶5. ORF television's regional news program Wien Heute on March 22 reported that as the first US carrier, Delta Airlines launched a direct flight service from the US to Austria. As of Tuesday, Delta will offer flights connecting Vienna and Atlanta five times a week. US Ambassador to Austria Susan McCaw, who attended the ceremony to inaugurate the new route and welcome the first Delta plane's arrival in Vienna, emphasized that the connection is "good for tourism and business, and will bring the two countries closer together."

Putin in Vienna

¶6. Russian President Vladimir Putin will arrive for a two-day official visit in Vienna today. Talks with President Heinz Fischer and Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer are expected to cover bilateral economic ties as well as international issues such as the future status of Kosovo and concerns over the situations in Iraq and Iran. Austrian leaders have also said they will address issues of human rights and democracy in Russia. Austrian media do not believe, however, that a breakthrough on any critical issues will be achieved.

All Austrian media prominently report on the upcoming visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Vienna. Semi-official daily Wiener Zeitung suggests that the Russian President may have been hoping his second visit to Austria will be a pragmatic and informal one. But there are major issues on the agenda for Putin's meetings with Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer and Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik. There will be a number of protests during the visit of the Russian President, including one by Reporters without Borders calling for greater press freedom in Russia. Putin will be accompanied by his wife, Ludmilla, on his visit. Mass-circulation daily Kurier published an interview with UN special rapporteur for torture, Manfred Nowak, who said Russia is on the list of countries where basic human rights are threatened. There is "urgent need for action," as the situation in Russia has deteriorated in the past few years, Nowak stressed. Representatives of NGOs and journalists have been the victims of intimidation tactics aimed at restricting their freedom of speech. The murder of Anna Politkovskaya was merely "the tip of the iceberg," Nowak stressed, adding that there was a lot of political pressure on the judiciary.

In mass-circulation tabloid Oesterreich, Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik discussed Russian-EU relations, and emphasized that the EU had a vested interest in good relations with Russia. Regarding Austria, "tourism and the economic dynamics are impressive examples of good Austrian-Russian relations," she said. A secure, lasting partnership between the EU and Russia is in the interests of both sides, and "something we will continue to work on," Plassnik added.

Lebanon Unrest Continues

¶7. Thousands of people have fled from a refugee camp in northern Lebanon after three days of heavy fighting between Lebanese troops and militants from the Fatah al Islam group. Dozens of soldiers,

civilians and militants have been killed in the fighting. The UN head of humanitarian affairs has appealed to both sides to allow aid into the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp near Tripoli. The Lebanese leadership has also asked Washington for additional military aid. According to State Department spokesperson Sean McCormick, the US government is currently looking into the request from Beirut.

Democrats Drop Iraq Pullout Plan

18. Democrat leaders in the US Congress have abandoned plans to link support for a bill funding the US military efforts in Iraq to a timetable for troop withdrawal. The Democrats' decision followed the release of previously classified material showing Osama bin-Laden asking the head of al Qaeda in Iraq to target the US. Austrian media see the Democrats' move as a partial victory for the US President, says centrist daily Die Presse.
McCaw